

Esther: Reluctant Trust

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INTRODUCTION	I
AUTHOR, PLACE, & DATE.....	I
HISTORY OR FICTION?.....	I
THEOLOGY.....	II
CHAPTER 1	1
COMMENTARY	2
QUESTIONS.....	4
CHAPTER 2	6
COMMENTARY	7
QUESTIONS.....	10
CHAPTER 3	11
COMMENTARY	11
QUESTIONS.....	15
CHAPTER 4	16
COMMENTARY	16
QUESTIONS.....	19
CHAPTER 5	20
COMMENTARY	20
QUESTIONS.....	22
CHAPTER 6	24
COMMENTARY	24
QUESTIONS.....	27
CHAPTER 7	28
COMMENTARY	28
QUESTIONS.....	31
CHAPTER 8	32
COMMENTARY	33
QUESTIONS.....	36
CHAPTER 9	37
COMMENTARY	38
QUESTIONS.....	40
CHAPTER 10	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
COMMENTARY	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
QUESTIONS.....	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.

Introduction

Author, Place, & Date

We do not know who wrote the book of Esther, nor precisely when it was written. Scholars' estimates vary widely from the 400's B.C. (relatively close to the time of Esther) to the 200's B.C.. The book is set during the reign of Xerxes I (called Ahasuerus in Hebrew) who reigned over the Persian Empire from 486-465 B.C.. The author seems to have been somewhat familiar with the Persian empire; yet, Esther disagrees with other ancient sources on several points, most prominently on the name of Xerxes' wife and what happens to her. Vashti is an otherwise unknown name and it is hard to understand why a prominent queen would be unknown. Though Greek sources are not very reliable about listing all Persian queens, usually only naming the ones they find important. Because all the historical records we have are somewhat fuzzy, we cannot be sure of exactly what happened in Xerxes' court; but, it is extremely unlikely that the story happened as reported. The book was likely written outside of Judea and Jerusalem, because there is no reference to Jewish hallmarks we would expect if it were written by a scribe in Jerusalem. It is also likely that Esther circulated as an oral tradition before being written down. The fact that the Septuagint (LXX or Greek) is so drastically different from the Hebrew text implies that the story was widely known and somewhat varied in its telling.

History or Fiction?

We must not be quick to separate history and fiction in the Bible, particularly in a book like Esther. The Jews who wrote the Bible did not have the categories we use today and would have seen no problem with fictionalizing details within a historical record, if it helped bring out "the moral of the story". For instance, "Vashti" sounds like the Persian word for, "beautiful" or "beloved" and "Ahasuerus" sounds something like "king headache".ⁱ Such embellishment means we should not be too attached to the historicity of the book; but, one should also not discredit the book because of such details. It is highly unlikely that a Persian king should write a law to exterminate a people, Cyrus I (550-530 B.C.) instituted a policy of tolerance of all conquered minorities (see Ezra), this policy was followed by subsequent kings. Yet, Xerxes had put down two rebellions with force and destroyed temples, he was also focused on luxury and building his harem. Xerxes known actions means there is some truth in the climate of the Book of Esther, but, we cannot be certain where history fades and story begins. The story, as related in the book, is a dramatization, and not a history; but, that should not undermine our opinion of the book. As implausible as it is that the story of Esther happened in the way described, it is also highly unlikely that the Jews would have invented the Feast of Purim out of whole cloth. There had to be a reason for the feast to begin and this book claims to know that reason, we must take that seriously as historical fact. Perhaps there was a Jewish girl who won some favor

at court and did perform some action which was understood as bringing salvation to her people. In our modern culture, we like clear-cut lines between history and fiction and these are absent from Esther; however, we cannot let that undermine our confidence in the book or its message.

Theology

Esther is one of the two books in the Hebrew Bible (along with Song of Songs) which does not mention God, prayer, or the Hebrew covenant explicitly. This is a very difficult concept for some readers, and they seem to gravitate toward the LXX version which has lengthy prayers and references to God. The lack of Divine presence in the book is something every reader must confront and reconcile. Historically speaking, some scholars have suggested that Esther lacks references to God because it was meant to be read at a feast which involved heavy drinking and that references to God were avoiding to prevent those who were drunk from accidental blasphemy. Even though God is not mentioned (only an obscure reference to fasting) we must ask ourselves, “is this deliverance God’s work or simply the result of people taking their lives into their own hands?” Esther is very realistic in helping us who often are unsure of whether or not God is leading or helping us as we go throughout our daily lives.¹ Esther can be helpful when do not where God is or if God is active in our situations.

We cannot discount the fact that these are the Jews who did not return home when Cyrus I declared the Jews could return home. These are the Jews outside of the Promised Land, yet, it is through these Jews that all Jews even those in Judea are saved. Some might have looked down on them as not as committed to God’s covenant, yet, it is through them that God works.

Major themes

Below are some of the major themes to trace throughout the story:

- God’s providence and human activity.
- The reversal of fortunes.
- Pride and humility.
- Identification with and outside God’s people (insider vs outsider).
- The relationship between God’s people and the world.
- Masculine and Feminine power struggles.
- God’s use of people.

¹ Systematic theologians call this God’s providence; God working in the nature human world to help God’s people in their daily lives.

Chapter 1

¹This happened in the days of Ahasuerus, the same Ahasuerus who ruled over one hundred twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia. ²In those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, ³in the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his officials and ministers. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were present, ⁴while he displayed the great wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and pomp of his majesty for many days, one hundred eighty days in all.

⁵When these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in the citadel of Susa, both great and small, a banquet lasting for seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace. ⁶There were white cotton curtains and blue hangings tied with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and colored stones. ⁷Drinks were served in golden goblets, goblets of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. ⁸Drinking was by flagons, without restraint; for the king had given orders to all the officials of his palace to do as each one desired. ⁹Furthermore, Queen Vashti gave a banquet for the women in the palace of King Ahasuerus.

¹⁰On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who attended him, ¹¹to bring Queen Vashti before the king, wearing the royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the officials her beauty; for she was fair to behold. ¹²But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command conveyed by the eunuchs. At this the king was enraged, and his anger burned within him.

¹³Then the king consulted the sages who knew the laws (for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and custom, ¹⁴and those next to him were Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven officials of Persia and Media, who had access to the king, and sat first in the kingdom): ¹⁵"According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus conveyed by the eunuchs?" ¹⁶Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, "Not only has Queen Vashti done wrong to the king, but also to all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. ¹⁷For this deed of the queen will be made known to all women, causing them to look with contempt on their husbands, since they will say, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.' ¹⁸This very day the noble ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will rebel against the king's officials, and there will be no end of contempt and wrath! ¹⁹If it pleases the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be altered, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal position to another who is better than

she. ²⁰ So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, vast as it is, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike.”

²¹ This advice pleased the king and the officials, and the king did as Memucan proposed; ²² he sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, declaring that every man should be master in his own house.

Commentary

Vv 1-9: The stage is set during the reign of Xerxes (Ahasuerus) king of Persia (486-465 bce.), son of Darius I and known for his attacks on Greece 480-479 bce. It is unclear what is meant by 127 provinces (very likely this is an exaggeration to make the story sound more grand), but, the geographical compass of India to Ethiopia represents most of the known world and probably highlights the extent of Xerxes' power. Xerxes governs the world and his decree is absolute, the terror of this picture is revealed below when the queen refuses to entertain her husband's guests. Susa was the winter capitol of the Persian Empire and one of cities from which emperors reigned. The feast may represent some kind of war council, as happened in 483 bce. for planning an assault on Greece. These were not little feasts; the king was trying to rally support for his ideas and promising vast wealth to those who supported him and the feast was meant as an opulent display proving he could deliver on his promise. The feast in 483 lasted 183 days. Following the Assyrian custom Persian kings would hold such banquets to display their wealth, providing lavish parties and gifts which would be paid for by tribute sent from other kingdoms. Here the king throws one of these banquets to display his power and wealth and attempts to up the ante by displaying his beautiful queen; which would again be a sign of his power and manhood.

On a literary level the book opening with a feast sets the stage for a theme of feasting throughout the story. Purim is a raucous feast and feasting plays a large role in the story, and the king's feast opens us up to this theme. There is also some literary irony in the king creating a law that each person could drink as that one liked- "The law is that you must do what you want!" This irony is compounded when Vashti is imprisoned for doing what she wants. There is perhaps a theological truth implicit that when each person does his or her own will eventually there is tyranny or anarchy.

Vv 10-12: The account of Vashti is very open-ended and we are left somewhat confused as to what the King's command ultimately meant and why Vashti would be so resolved to ignore it. Verse 9 informs us that Vashti and the other important women were having their own separate feast, and this fact has led most scholars to assume (probably correctly) that proper Persian wives did not attend drinking parties with their husbands. Rather, the women present at these parties were dancers or low ranking concubines who may be taken advantage of or abused with little or no consequences. The king is trying to show off his power, whether or no he is drunk

makes no difference, by making the queen act like a common dancing girl. Would the king really have paraded his wife around a hall full of drunk men for them to taunt, harass, and perhaps assault? Even if the king did not love her in the modern convention of marriage any of these would have been an assault on his power and authority as sovereign. Perhaps, the author is also providing a subtle warning for not making hasty decisions when one is intoxicated.

The queen is put into a very delicate situation, if she submits to the king's will she will be made to flaunt herself in front of a large group of drunk men, risking the ever-present threat of unwanted sexual contact (and if she were raped surely, she would be expelled from the harem). To deny the king is to risk his displeasure and exile or death. Some commentators try to play up her role and praise her moral character in the face of a misogynistic society; however, while we certainly would expect any virtuous woman to make the same choice there is no clear motive for Vashti. All of this though looks at the situation through thoroughly modern eyes and fails to take into account a Persian court with different ethics and customs. We obviously should encourage women to uphold high morality and not parade themselves about for the pleasure of a group of men (particularly when drunk); yet, that does not mean that we can assume Vashti held to such a high moral standard. It may well have been that she was having too good a time in her own party (some have suggested that the location of her party in the king's palace meant it was as debauched as the king's) or perhaps she was going to make the king come fetch her himself, or, that she wanted a bride for this pleasure. In reality the author does not dwell on Vashti's dilemma because she is unimportant to the story other than to reveal Ahasuerus' character (or lack thereof) and the reason why Esther can gain the throne. Vashti is little more than a name in the story, meant to highlight the debauched Persian court whose government has no concern for God's morality.

Vv 13-22: Vashti's refusal causes an uproar and the king and his advisors are at a loss on how to deal with her. It is suggested that the power of every man in the empire *to control* his wife is threatened. Is this satire, poking fun at either the pettiness or impotence of the Persian court, or, is there some underlying truth that kingdoms of the world govern their houses as they do their kingdoms as a never-ending quest for control? Is this a bid for power from Vashti that now must be harshly confronted by Ahasuerus before his queen and subsequently all women gain dominance in the martial relationship? Or is this a jab at the stupidity of the Persian court that its bureaucracy is so immense that the king must gather advisors before he can even take action against a rebellious queen? Or is the author suggesting that the Persian king and court are so weak that the only way they can maintain stability within their domestic circles is to codify obedience in irrevocable law. These assertions make the Persian court seem either cruel or silly, either there is a real incivility within the court (which one can see in the character of Haman) or there is sheer ineptitude (which one can see in Ahasuerus).

The king's decree for Vashti's punishment is to be sent out across the empire, a relatively easy task since the Persian empire had a good mail system. Royal edicts would have been sent out with riders written in Aramaic (the trade language of the time) and would have been translated by scribes in the towns to which they were delivered. This way common villagers with little education would be able to hear the new law in their native language. It is a little insensible for us to hear that a law was irrevocable, and some commentators have suggested this is an element of satire within the text. It is true that no evidence has been found that such a custom was in practice (or was the rule of law) in Persia; however, one can easily speculate on an authoritarian system which held to the deity of the ruler, endorsing an idea which held that the king could make no error and thus the law was always perfect. Such an ideology would necessitate an army of bureaucrats and political advisors tasked with working around and interpreting existing law.

Notice the king's decree is not that women should obey their husband's, but, that Vashti is stripped of her title and privilege she did not want to come when the king called, now she will never see him again. The law is meant to give husbands authority, but, it does not take any real steps to do so. One might legitimately ask how this is supposed to incline women to obey or serve; is this decree anything other than the petty revenge of a jilted lover who happens to hold royal power. One must also seriously ask what "respect" and "honor" mean if they are to be given at the edge of a sword. One may also ask what the Persian ideas of marriage amounted to if this is the way married couples acted toward one another. Of course, this might not have anything to do with marriage, but, may be the author's way of showing how weak the king is, he is so inept that he cannot even control his own household. The whole affair may be more about the ineptitude of a ruler who has not submitted to God than any kind of statement on household relationships.

Questions

1. Do you approach Esther as a fictional tale, a historical account, or somewhere in the middle (i.e. historical fiction, or embellished account) and how do you think this influences how you see the story, characters, and God's role in history?
2. While Queen Vashti cannot be said to be a moral role-model for young women, how can her take be used in discussions within our culture were sex trafficking (in its various forms) is a real and present danger?
3. After reading the first chapter what is your opinion of the Persian court and in particular, King Ahasuerus?
4. Does the Persian idea of feasting impact your idea of feasting and the place of wine in society? How so?

5. How does the Church's ideas of hierarchy differ from Persia's, both in the home and in society/government? What are scriptures which can inform these ideas?

Themes

What themes do you see highlighted in the chapter and how does the chapter make you think about them?

- God's providence and human activity.
- The reversal of fortunes.
- Pride and humility.
- Identification with and outside God's people (insider vs outsider).
- The relationship between God's people and the world.
- Masculine and Feminine power struggles.
- God's use of people.

Chapter 2

¹After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had cooled, he thought about Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. ²Then the king's servants who attended him said, "Beautiful young virgins must be sought out for the king. ³The king should appoint commissioners in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in the citadel of Susa under custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; let their cosmetic treatments be given them. ⁴Then may the girl who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This delighted the king, and he ordered it.

⁵Now there was a Jew in the citadel of Susa whose name was Mordecai descendant of Jair descendant of Shimei descendant of Kish, a Benjaminite. ⁶Who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with King Jeconiah of Judah, whom King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had carried away. ⁷Mordecai had brought up Hadassah, that is Esther, his cousin, for she had neither father nor mother; the girl was fair and beautiful, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter. ⁸So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in the citadel of Susa in custody of Hegai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put in custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women. ⁹The girl pleased him and won his favor, and he quickly provided her with her cosmetic treatments and her portion of food, and with seven chosen maids from the king's palace, and advanced her and her maids to the best place in the harem. ¹⁰Esther did not reveal her people or kindred, for Mordecai had charged her not to tell. ¹¹Every day Mordecai would walk around in front of the court of the harem, to learn how Esther was and how she fared.

¹²The turn came for each girl to go in to King Ahasuerus, after being twelve months under the regulations for the women, since this was the regular period of their cosmetic treatment, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and cosmetics for women. ¹³When the girl went in to the king she was given whatever she asked for to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. ¹⁴In the evening she went in; then in the morning she came back to the second harem in custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines; she did not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name.

¹⁵When the turn came for Esther daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had adopted her as his own daughter, to go in to the king, she asked for nothing except what Hegai the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised. Now Esther was admired by all who saw her. ¹⁶When Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus in his royal palace in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign, ¹⁷the king loved Esther more than all the other women; of all the virgins she won his favor and devotion, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. ¹⁸Then the king gave a great

banquet to all his officials and ministers—“Esther’s banquet.” He also granted a holiday to the provinces, and gave gifts with royal liberality.

¹⁹ When the virgins were being gathered together, Mordecai was sitting at the king’s gate. ²⁰ Now Esther had not revealed her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had charged her; for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him. ²¹ In those days, while Mordecai was sitting at the king’s gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king’s eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, became angry and conspired to assassinate King Ahasuerus. ²² But the matter came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai. ²³ When the affair was investigated and substantiated, both men were impaled on pikes. It was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king.

Commentary

VV 1-4: We are not told how long Ahasuerus is angry, but, we are told that the episode with Vashti happened in the third year of his reign (483 bce.) and that Esther is chosen queen in his seventh year (479 bce.). If we are to trust that Esther is historical (or historically based) this is immediately after Ahasuerus (Xerxes, see Introduction) returned from a failed attempt to conquer Greece. This would provide an excuse for the king taking so long to find a queen. If we wanted to put the story into a historical context, we could understand that the king left orders to find eligible women before his campaign and that he made his selection immediately after. However, it seems unlikely that the king would marry months after returned from a disastrous campaign. It is also hard to believe that the king would select a bride which would contaminate the royal line. In the ancient world kings (outside Israel) were often held as divine and were expected to choose brides from a small group of noble families. It is also likely that the many of these families would be upset with the king after such a terrible defeat by the Greeks and would be even more outraged if he had chosen a queen from among the commoners. Such a move would have been political suicide (which would have possibly led to one of those royal *suicides*).

It is also extremely humorous that the idea of how to select his queen did not come from his advisors or himself, but, his servants. One idea that seems to creep up throughout the book is that Ahasuerus is not in control of his own court. The only decision he seems to make on his own is to have Haman impaled at the end of the narrative, everything else is suggested to him by someone else. There is a theme in the Bible that pagan kings are puppets in God’s hands ultimately furthering God’s plans, perhaps the author is playing on this theme by saying that pagan kings are merely rubes taken advantage of by everyone.

It is true that Persian kings would occasionally gather new harems by selecting “the most beautiful virgins” these would take the place of those whom the king lost interest in. Virgins would be taken from their homes and paraded before the king; the king would choose the one he wanted to sleep with. When selected the girls would be isolated from the public in the care

of eunuchs and maids, they may become pregnant, they may not, they may be chosen again, they may not, essentially they became sex-slaves. Some feminists have suggested this was a horribly sexist practice; however, while horrible it was not sexist since young boys who met the right description would be gathered up and forced to become eunuchs.ⁱⁱ What we are seeing is only half of a despicable practice which allowed some elite to completely dominate the lives of others. In both cases the rich and powerful abused individuals' sexuality and both must be denounced, the sexism seen is only a symptom of a far larger problem.

Vv 5-14: Mordecai lineage presents a problem, v6 literally opens "who had been..." and does not tell us which member of the family had been taken into captivity. Translations like the NRSV and Tannak understand that it was Kish who was taken in 586 bce. Though the Hebrew text may point to Mordecai as the one taken meaning he would have been 115 at the time Esther was crowned. But this is to focus too much on the historicity of the comment, the author is connecting Mordecai with the Jews who were led into exile. The record connecting Mordecai to Kish the Benjamite connects Mordecai to Saul the first king of Israel and the son of Kish (1 Sam. 9:1-2).² The genealogy and reference to the exile are then likely not historical pins to push into a timeline; rather, they represent cultural pins meant to highlight Mordecai's connection to ethnic Judaism (whatever his religious affiliations were). Thus, Mordecai is intimately connected with the people of Israel suffering in their exile and bearing the lineage of the king (albeit the one displaced by the Davidic line).

It is also a puzzle why the author uses the names Mordecai and Esther, which are Babylonian names derived from Marduk and Ishtar (Babylonian god and goddess). Was this a Babylonian story coopted by the Jews? Is this a subtle jab at Jews who do not want to keep their national identity, saying they are Jews and play a role in God's plan no matter what they want? Is this meant to show that even pagan deities are used by God and submit to God?ⁱⁱⁱ Likely these were simply common names among Jews after the Babylonian exile as Jews began to culturally assimilate to Babylon taking on similar names and dress as the culture around them. Esther at least has two names, one Hebrew and one pagan, a woman caught between two worlds (whether she is trying to escape one or not). Does this represent the Jews caught between two worlds or is this Esther caught between her status as a Jew and the glory of the Persian empire?

A full year of beauty treatments would have been luxurious and excessive especially for several young women and may be an exaggeration; but, it is possible to think of the uber-rich to decadently spending money on themselves in just this way. Esther, unlike other heroes of Jewish exile literature Daniel, Tobias, and Judith, does not seem to hold to Jewish dietary laws

² It may be that the author is presenting us with a literal genealogy and Mordecai's great-grandfather was a man named Kish who was taken into captivity from the traditional land of Benjamin, but, given other references we will see later we should be aware of the allusion to Saul.

(what today we would call kosher laws). This fact opens us up to a very important question, is Esther a heroine to be emulated? Is Esther a character who succeeds because of her character or is she the archetype of someone used to further God's purposes despite their several moral flaws? Conservative commentators usually laud Esther as a righteous woman, despite the fact that she seems unconcerned with Jewish laws and, as the next paragraph shows, playing the part of concubine. Is this simply because we are starved for Biblical female role models, do we just have a tendency toward heroizing the savior as an ideal character, or is she truly someone to emulate despite the seeming lack of concern for her Jewish traditions? It is hard to believe that Esther could cling to her Jewish identity and maintain its secrecy (i.e. Daniel 6:16-28).

Vv 15-18: It is now Esther's turn to go to the king for her one night with him. She takes nothing except what Haggai suggests. First, we must notice the beginning of a pattern, Esther ingratiates herself with Haggai, everyone seems to fall for Esther. She seems to be one of those women with exceptional physical beauty and the charm to make it dangerous. Haggai is the first to fall under her spell, but, soon after the king also falls for her and later Haman gets sucked in

We just said that the book seems to show little concern for the Jewish religious customs, yet, some suggest that Esther's preparation for meeting the king shows she rejects the pagan delicacies. Others though think that she is relying on her natural beauty over the cosmetic treatments. Some would suggest that this is Esther's shrewd genius asking for insider information about the king rather than simply trusting her own abilities and charm to seduce the king.

Many commentators notice the glaring omission of a wedding ceremony or any reference to marriage between Ahasuerus and Esther. Does she truly become queen and the writer chose to ignore the ceremony? This is possible, it would have been shameful for a Jewish girl to marry a pagan, even if he was king and so the author may have tried to downplay such a relation. Of course it would have been equally unlikely that a Persian king would marry a Jew and so Esther (despite the title in the book) may never have been a queen. It is also unlikely that a queen would have such limited access to the king's presence as Esther seems to have. Esther may have been a concubine of significant standing in the court, one of the Ahasuerus' favorites; but, not his true wife. Such questions go well beyond the story, but, do have impact on how we see the story and what relationship it may have with history.

Vv 19-23: This paragraph provides more key background to the basic plot of the story. Mordecai is a loyal and well-positioned supporter of the king who, though Esther, spoils an assassination attempt. Some scholars suggest that Mordecai may have been a plain clothes royal informant and that is why he was standing at the gate (though he is often depicted as a gatekeeper). If this is the case then Mordecai would probably had several avenues for reporting his message to the king, by confiding his information in Esther he is raising her

importance at court. Particularly if Esther were a concubine, providing the king with life-saving information is going to help her be favored. Mordecai giving the information of the plot to Esther and Esther mentioning Mordecai to the king mean that both will gain favor for court. Yet in a plot twist, Mordecai's deed is recorded but never properly honored, setting the stage for a later confrontation with Haman.

Questions

1. What do you think of the fact that the king is always receiving plans of action from subordinates, does this betray an incompetent ruler, or show a wise delegator?
2. The passive "she was taken" does not tell us whether Esther wanted to enter the harem or if she was taken against her will, which do you think more likely? Consider the fact that she won the king's favor.
3. Why do you think Mordecai would tell Esther to conceal her identity, was this for her protection or was it to help her in winning the king's favor, were his motives pure or political ambition?
4. Is it important that no mention is made of Esther keeping Jewish customs like Sabbath or food laws, do you think these were important to her, what does their absence from the text say about their priority?
5. We always have a tendency to view biblical characters as heroes or villains, is there room for some of the main characters to be anti-heroes (individuals who accomplish a task deemed good, moral, or valuable but done through purely selfish means)?

Themes

What themes do you see highlighted in the chapter and how does the chapter make you think about them?

- God's providence and human activity.
- The reversal of fortunes.
- Pride and humility.
- Identification with and outside God's people (insider vs outsider).
- The relationship between God's people and the world.
- Masculine and Feminine power struggles.
- God's use of people.

Chapter 3

¹After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him and set his seat above all the officials who were with him. ²And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and did obeisance to Haman; for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai did not bow down or do obeisance. ³Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, "Why do you disobey the king's command?" ⁴When they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai's words would avail; for he had told them that he was a Jew. ⁵When Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or do obeisance to him, Haman was infuriated. ⁶But he thought it beneath him to lay hands on Mordecai alone. So, having been told who Mordecai's people were, Haman plotted to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.

⁷In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur—which means "the die"—before Haman for the day and for the month, and the lot fell on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. ⁸Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them. ⁹If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued for their destruction, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, so that they may put it into the king's treasuries." ¹⁰So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. ¹¹The king said to Haman, "The money is given to you, and the people as well, to do with them as it seems good to you."

¹²Then the king's secretaries were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded, was written to the king's satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the officials of all the peoples, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language; it was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king's ring. ¹³Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces, giving orders to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. ¹⁴A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation, calling on all the peoples to be ready for that day. ¹⁵The couriers went quickly by order of the king, and the decree was issued in the citadel of Susa. The king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.

Commentary

Vv 1-6: We are not told why Haman was honored by the king, only that he is now the top official in the land. Likewise, we are not told why Mordecai refuses to bow to him and show him respect. Some commentators have supposed that Mordecai was identifying the bowing to

Haman with worship and so prohibited from doing so (as in the story of the three Hebrews in Daniel 3, this is explicit in the LXX). However, Haman would not have claimed the worship due to God and there is precedent for Jews bowing to foreign rulers (Gen. 23:7; 43-28). While other sources tell us that Jews did due honor to members of the Persian court. It is unlikely that Mordecai was refusing to honor Haman on religious grounds because such a reason would most likely be recorded, Jewish authors liked to celebrate fellow Jews standing up for righteous beliefs. It is far more likely that Mordecai simply held a personal grudge against Haman, and refused to show him any due honor. Perhaps, the author, by placing Haman's promotion immediately after Mordecai's loyalty is trying to imply that Mordecai thought that he should have been promoted instead of Haman. Haman had stolen Mordecai's honor and now Mordecai would not give any honor to Haman. The LXX implies that Haman was somehow connected to the plot which Mordecai uncovered and on those grounds perhaps Mordecai smells a rat.

There is one further point that is very interesting, just as Mordecai is connected to King Saul and the Israelites in exile, Haman is connected to Agag (an Agagite) and the Amalekites (in the LXX he is a Macedonian or Greek the new enemy of the Jews). In 1 Samuel 15 Saul defeats Agag and in Exodus 17 Israel defeats the Amalekites as they try to prevent Israel from entering the Promised Land (the first people to go to battle with Israel after leaving Egypt). Is Haman actually descended from these groups, no; rather, the author is connecting him theologically with archenemies of the Israelite people.^{iv} Just as Saul went to war with Agag, so now their descendants (at least theologically if not biologically) will join the fray. When Saul defeated Agag he failed to listen to the prophet Samuel and kept Agag alive as a prisoner so that Samuel himself killed Agag; Also in this story Haman is not brought down at the hand of Mordecai or even a Jew, but, is killed by Ahasuerus for insulting the queen.

Just as the king had to use bully tactics in chapter 1 so the women of Persia would honor their husbands, so here the king commands homage be done to Haman. The implication is that Haman is not likely to receive homage based on his own character and that would reflect badly on the king. Persian kings were known to rank royal courtiers by recent cations, meaning that Haman's position was not secure, if someone came along who pleased the king more or if Haman gave poor advice one day he might be demoted from his favored position.

Mordecai had dishonored Haman in the way the Persian court was worried the women might dishonor their husbands. This being so we must wonder why King Ahasuerus did not threaten or punish Mordecai? Mordecai's action was causing the king to lose face, since it was the king's command Mordecai was disobeying. Yet, it is Haman, concerned for his own honor, who is outraged. It is leaked to Haman that Mordecai is a Jew and this gives Haman the idea that all Jews must die. Notice that it occurs to Haman that it would be beneath his station to kill

Mordecai alone, he must take his revenge on Mordecai's entire people. This whole scene develops like the opening confrontation with Vashti, with Haman putting himself in the position of the king.

Vv 7-11: Haman does not simply rush to the king demanding justice, he consults others and forms a plan. Purim is the plural form of the word "pur" or dice; the feast of Purim takes its name from the central role the dice play in the story. Ancient cultures did not view rolling dice as strictly chance, they believed that divine beings could influence the fall of the dice and would convey messages through them (cf. Jonah 1:7; Acts 1:26). Haman was praying consulting the gods on which day would be the best to destroy the Jews.

Plan set Haman confronts the king with brilliant rhetoric. He begins with a complete truth that the Jews are a people scattered throughout the kingdom. Then he proceeds to tell the king that this distinct people scattered through the land have unique customs and laws. Then he twists this to present a distorted and threatening picture, because they have their own custom and laws they do not follow the national law.^v At last the Jews are presented as a national threat, because they hold to separate laws, and because they are scattered throughout the land they are a danger as an underground resistance or terrorist organization. If this event was to have taken place in the time of Xerxes (or Artaxerxes as the LXX says) then the Jews had been restored to their homeland by this time. The Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem under Cyrus II some fifty years before the events described (538 bc). One must then ask how such information would escape Haman's use or the king's notice. It is true that many Jews did not return (or at least immediately return) to Judea after the edict of Cyrus, but, one would think that this dangerous people having a homeland would have come up in Haman's speech. It should, also, be remembered that Persia was committed to a policy of maintaining distinct cultures within the empire. Cyrus' order that exiles could return home was an attempt to maintain peace through allowing cultural distinctions to flourish, as opposed to the Babylonian method of trying to wipe them out through exile. While the author (as all Jewish authors) places emphasis on the Jews as a distinctive group easily identified, in historical Persia the only thing that would have mattered is whether or not they were undermining the King with their distinctive behavior. To accomplish this Haman interprets Mordecai's actions as the Jewish response to the king's commands rather than Mordecai's response to Haman.

To Sweeten the deal, Haman volunteers to pay for the expense to the empire, by adding 333 tons of silver to the royal coffers (roughly equal to the Persian annual tax revenue). It is unclear whether that money was to be paid from Haman's private account or if Haman anticipated that the silver would be looted from the vanquished Jews and handed over to the Persian court. Either way the number must be exaggerated(?) it is hard to see such an amount being turned

over to the king, though, such a large number shows how much Haman hated Mordecai and by extension the Jews.

It is unclear whether the king is accepting or declining the silver. Some scholars read v11 as the king accepting the money in a formal and polite way, while others see the king's response as rejecting the money. It is highly likely that Haman framed the complaint in such a way that he showed the king the true threat to his realm posed by the Jews and that his offer of money was compensation for the lost tax revenue to the king. But, what Haman conveyed in the offer of silver was that he was personally so invested in seeing the king's power upheld that he was personally willing to compensate the king, yet, the king must act to preserve himself. The king touched by the personal loyalty and affection of Haman grants the request yet refuses the money, knowing it to be an impossible sum only offered out of true loyalty and goodness of a counselor who was protecting the king's interests. This is a subtle political wager by Haman that by offering to recompense the king he is looking completely altruistic in his plot to exterminate the Jews. In fact, the king may have been so touched by Haman's offer that he is actually giving the looted Jewish possessions to Haman for rendering such service to the king.

As we have seen before the king does not bother to make his own decisions or rule his own country, but, allows himself to be led by the nose by his advisors. On a story level this makes the Persian Empire seem rather ridiculous. We can easily see the first audience having a riotous laugh at the expense of the Persians as the wine of Purim flowed.

Vv 12-15: The edict is sent through the land that the day of destruction should be the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (13 Nissan). This was a significant day for the Jews since it represented the eve of Passover. Haman unintentionally sets to destroy the Jews as they commemorate the day of God's great rescue of the Jews. We should at this point begin to see some irony, Haman enemy of the Jews had consulted the gods on the best day to destroy the Jews and the day given was the eve of the deliverance of the Jews. Did Haman consult the gods only to be answered by God? Did the enemy looking to destroy the Jews get set up by the one protecting the Jews?

The message is sent throughout the empire and to ensure that people will take part in the slaughter plunder is explicitly mentioned. Even if people will not destroy those who are undermining the political structure of the king they will get involved for personal gain. It has been estimated that a message would take three months to spread throughout the empire, ensuring plenty of time for outlying regions to hear the news and formulate plans (and plenty of time for Jews to live in terror).

The reactions of the royal court and the city could not be more drastic. The city is in confusion over the decree while the king parties. Again, we see the ineptitude of the Persian government

on display, the king just signed the death warrants of thousands of people and then he turns without a thought to drinking and debauchery. It is not likely the people of Susa would have taken the side of the Jews, but, it is probable that they would have been talking about the order, unsure of why the king would issue it and taking sides about what the likely result would be and who might be next on the block. The author then is creating a rather wide gulf between the upstairs and downstairs sets. The king and ruling class are woefully out of touch with the needs and concerns of the citizens and little care how their orders impact the larger populace.

Questions

1. Is there any religious significance to Mordecai's refusal to honor Haman, how should Christians interact with government when we disagree with it?
2. Haman's speech to the king mixes truth and lies in a simplistic picture of the Jews as enemies how do we prevent ourselves from doing similar things?
3. What do we make of Haman expecting to hear from the gods through the dice, do we participate in similar activities and are such divinations appropriate?
4. How do we prevent ourselves from becoming detached from the suffering and concerns of those around us?
5. The king and Haman are completely detached from the concerns of the citizens is this the norm for the rich and powerful?

Themes

What themes do you see highlighted in the chapter and how does the chapter make you think about them?

- God's providence and human activity.
- The reversal of fortunes.
- Pride and humility.
- Identification with and outside God's people (insider vs outsider).
- The relationship between God's people and the world.
- Masculine and Feminine power struggles.
- God's use of people.

Chapter 4

¹When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went through the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry; ²he went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one might enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. ³In every province, wherever the king's command and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes.

⁴When Esther's maids and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed; she sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth; but he would not accept them. ⁵Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what was happening and why. ⁶Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, ⁷and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. ⁸Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther, explain it to her, and charge her to go to the king to make supplication to him and entreat him for her people.

⁹Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. ¹⁰Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, ¹¹"All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days." ¹²When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, ¹³Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. ¹⁴For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." ¹⁵Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, ¹⁶"Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish." ¹⁷Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

Commentary

Vv 1-3: We have seen that the king and Haman have no concern for the Jews, the citizenry is in confusion, but, the Jews are terrified. Mordecai immediately goes into intense mourning ripping his clothes and donning the traditional burlap. It is interesting that Mordecai in a state of grief was not allowed near the king. There are two ways of looking at such a command, either people in the king's presence are to reflect the king's goodness and glory in their appearance; or else, the king is so deluded that he will not prevent the grief of the citizenry

from ruining his day. Without real evidence, we cannot make a decision, but, with the presentation of the king as a drunk so far in the book we can see the author pushing us toward the latter. Everything in the book tells us that the king of the Persians did not care much for the commoners and would not want his beautiful palace contaminated by their grief. Whether this was historically true we cannot say but it is certainly the way the book wants us to think. As in Jonah 3, this level of fasting and mourning has or is supposed to have a religious element, yet, among the Jews of Susa this element is missing. No prayer accompanies the fasting and mourning over the destruction of the Jews (though in the LXX it is supplied). It is precisely at this point in the story we begin to feel the conspicuous absence of God. God should be invoked as the savior of Israel, yet, there is no mention of God, and we must again ask, why?

Vv 4-8: So far in the story the harem has been a place of luxury and pampering for Esther; now it has become a citadel isolating her from her kin. She is on the inside with no knowledge of the events going on outside her walls. She did not even hear the news that is so engrossing the city, she is only told that her cousin is upset and in mourning. Her first response is understandable enough, she sends Mordecai clothes to change into so he can come to visit her and talk (at least presumably). She does not know the reason for his grief and cannot understand the magnitude of the situation.

Esther's only recourse, since Mordecai refuses to wear appropriate clothing and visit her, is to send messengers to meet him outside the gate. This is dangerous for Esther, since she has been hiding her identity in the Harem, now it will become very public that she is kin to Mordecai the Jew, as his response to the messenger is the official decree to kill Jews.

Vv 9-17: This paragraph represents a transition in the story in many ways. First until this point we have had summaries of Mordecai and Esther's conversation, as if that was background and now we have caught up to the story. With a transition to direct speeches the author tells us we have hit the important bits. Second, we learn that not all is well between Ahasuerus and Esther, she has been locked away for a month and after five years it seems the king may have grown tired of her. She is not in the place of privilege she held when she related the message from Mordecai that saved Ahasuerus' life. This fact means she is not likely to be invited to see the king and without that invitation it was death for anyone (except the seven most trusted advisors) to entreat the king's presence. The dialogue between Esther and Mordecai is somewhat difficult because of how vague it is.

While some commentators see this as a covert conversation hatching a plan between the two of them, the traditional view seems more likely, Esther is scared and Mordecai is pressing her to act. Esther understands the risk and danger inherent in disobeying the king, but, she feels safe in her ivory palace. Mordecai is pointing out that what she thinks of as a palace is in reality a cell where people will sell her out to death for a promotion. Esther seems rather reluctant to

act, until Mordecai points out that facing the king has only a chance of death, while inaction presents certain death.

Mordecai's words about Esther gaining her position in order to be in position to save the Jews seems out of place without a direct reference to God, but, is still a powerful statement. He understands the Jews will be delivered even if it is not through Esther; yet, she is uniquely placed to intercede for them. Questions we must ask about this theology include the obvious like, Does God have individual plans for individual people, or, simply a plan for creation we all fit into? And the less obvious would God create a plan which involved a young Jewish girl being stripped of her identity with God's people in order to seduce a pagan king? Would God participate in the utilitarian "ends justify the means" philosophy which would put Esther in the King's harem? What does Mordecai mean that salvation will come from somewhere else? What does Mordecai mean that she will die if she does not intercede, is he going to do something sinister, does he simply know the court well enough to know someone will betray her, or, is he functioning as a prophet saying God will not let her escape if she fails to help?

Esther is moved to action by Mordecai, and here we see the only character development in the whole book, until this point Esther has taken orders (or advice from everyone) she has been subordinate, now she gives the orders. She tells Mordecai to call a fast, she assumes her position as queen of her people. In short, she grows up, Esther is no longer the teenage beauty queen who will seduce the king, and literally sleep her way to the top, now she is going to act like a dignified woman and talk to the king face to face.

The three day fast Esther calls for may be a long and difficult thing, anyone who has ever fasted for three days in such a way knows the difficulty, or it may be rhetorical for a short fast, there is no way to know. Either way Esther is telling the people to call on their God, without mentioning God. Esther's command for the people to fast may be a reference to Joel 2:12, if so then the author is definitely framing her words against the backdrop of God's salvation for a formerly disobedient people. Joel proclaims the Day of the LORD is coming and that the people are not worthy of it and must fast and repent in order to survive. Esther may be playing on the same motif that in the captivity the Jews have not keep close to God (something she herself personifies) and they must repent before the LORD will save them. But, this is a lot of speculation since God makes no appearance in her speech. Is Esther truly recognizing the road she has walked down has been a false road and now she must walk a different path if she is to help save her people? If so this makes her character shift even more fundamental and praiseworthy as she is the only character who would really grow in the entire story.

Questions

1. The Jewish nation seems isolated in its grief unable to redress the injustice of the king's law, have you ever felt so isolated in your grief?
2. We often hear that God's people are about the business of redressing the injustices in society, but, how are God's people supposed to react when the injustice is directed against them?
3. What are some of the ivory palaces we hide ourselves in when confronted with dangers or difficulties? How do we overcome such difficulties?
4. What do you make of Esther's call to fasting, is it a sign of repentance, is it even religious, or is this simply a sign of solidarity among Jews? What practices do you use to express such religious devotion in your own life?
5. We have noted that God is not mentioned in the entire book of Esther, but, how does God's absence in this chapter when God's people are suffering, strike you?

Themes

What themes do you see highlighted in the chapter and how does the chapter make you think about them?

- God's providence and human activity.
- The reversal of fortunes.
- Pride and humility.
- Identification with and outside God's people (insider vs outsider).
- The relationship between God's people and the world.
- Masculine and Feminine power struggles.
- God's use of people.

Chapter 5

¹On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, opposite the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne inside the palace opposite the entrance to the palace. ²As soon as the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won his favor and he held out to her the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the top of the scepter. ³The king said to her, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom." ⁴Then Esther said, "If it pleases the king, let the king and Haman come today to a banquet that I have prepared for the king." ⁵Then the king said, "Bring Haman quickly, so that we may do as Esther desires." So the king and Haman came to the banquet that Esther had prepared. ⁶While they were drinking wine, the king said to Esther, "What is your petition? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." ⁷Then Esther said, "This is my petition and request: ⁸If I have won the king's favor, and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet that I will prepare for them, and then I will do as the king has said."

⁹Haman went out that day happy and in good spirits. But when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, and observed that he neither rose nor trembled before him, he was infuriated with Mordecai; ¹⁰nevertheless Haman restrained himself and went home. Then he sent and called for his friends and his wife Zeresh, ¹¹and Haman recounted to them the splendor of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honored him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and the ministers of the king. ¹²Haman added, "Even Queen Esther let no one but myself come with the king to the banquet that she prepared. Tomorrow also I am invited by her, together with the king. ¹³Yet all this does me no good so long as I see the Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate." ¹⁴Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "Build a stake seventy-five feet high, and in the morning tell the king to have Mordecai impaled on it; then go with the king to the banquet in good spirits." This advice pleased Haman, and he had the gallows made.

Commentary

Vv 1-8: The book began with the story of Vashti refusing to enter King Ahasuerus' presence when requested, now the book hinges on how the king will regard the woman who enters his presence unannounced. A further irony in this event is that Vashti lost her title "Queen" for not attending the king's banquet, and now the "Queen" is inviting the king to banquet with her. We already understand the danger that is inherent in entering the King's presence unannounced and Esther has faced that danger to set up a great reversal of fortunes in the book (see themes section below). Vashti's response to the king lead to his disfavor, Esther's challenge to the king lead to her praise.

The fast for which Esther has asked the community has been completely brushed over by the author. We see that Esther completed the days of fasting, yet, there is no detail of the fast. Perhaps the author, writing for a feasting community, did not want to sober the moment by giving great detail to those in grief and fasting. Rather, he skips right to Esther dressing. Esther's changing from the burlap of fasting into the royal robes is far more than a colorful detail to help us picture the story. Esther has gone through the fast, and identified with her people, the people under threat of the government; and on the other side she is ready to take up the symbols of the authority to save those people. One of the characteristics of a "mythological hero(ine)"³ is that this character descends through an especially difficult trial to rise up to the greatest heights. In Esther, Esther becomes the heroine of her people by first descending from the pampered life of a concubine, into the clothes of the struggling and doomed Jewish peasant, to rise again and rightly don the royal robes. Notice it is only after her fast that she wears "royal" clothes and is rightly called her people's queen.

We can get the impression from Esther's conversation with Mordecai that to be in the same room with the king unannounced was to face death. Here in chapter 5 though Esther seems to be lingering in the back of the room with other petitioners when the king notices her and calls her forward. Rather than being death to enter the king's audience chamber it was more likely death to approach the throne unbidden, meaning Esther had to wait with everyone else until called. Ahasuerus seems overjoyed to see her and his welcome makes us wonder, is he really so extravagant that he would give her half his kingdom? Persian kings seemed to enjoy making extravagant gifts to their favorites, but, this seems to be an idiom and not a sincere statement. Ahasuerus wanted to be generous, but, he was not that generous.

At the banquet the king repeats his question from the throne-room, clearly he understands that Esther has something important to ask of him and did simply adorn herself to invite him to dinner. Esther's banquet is clearly meant as a political weapon meant to ingratiate the king to her and giving her a better chance of receiving her request, and the king knows it. Esther, for her part, doubles down on her tactic and invites the king and Haman to another banquet. Her request must be important, but, clearly it is not going to keep her from a good banquet. Commentators note that Esther's first banquet is for the king and Haman is invited, but, the second is for both of them. Is there anything to this shift in language? Some suggest that Esther is trying to play to Haman's pride and getting him to relax before she springs the trap. Others believe that she is subtly planting a seed in the king's mind that she believes he and Haman are equals. Some say that this switch in pronouns is nothing more than a grammatical

³ I use the phrase as a specific literary category which has no bearing on whether or no there is historical fact behind the book. Myth properly understood can have history behind it; myth refers to the way of telling a story which helps the reader or listener understand the meaning or life-lesson. To equate myth with a fable is to fail to appreciate the myth.

change (or perhaps error) in Esther's language with no real meaning. Whatever the case, clearly the plan is working, the King is favorably disposed to Esther and Haman is swollen with the pride of being on intimate terms with the royals.

Vv 9-14: Haman's good mood quickly vanishes when he sees his rival Mordecai at the gate, Mordecai does not enter the story other than as a presence to disturb Haman's mood. Haman's mood improves slightly when he gets home and can brag to his wife and friends about his success. By all accounts Haman is a material success he has wealth, power, position, and sons; but, all of that is clouded by the fact that one man does not bow before him at the gate. This is the pettiness of pride, Haman should be content with his position in life, yet, he is disrespected by one individual and his world crashes. It is at this point that Haman's wife Zeresh speaks and proves herself to be a worthy wife for Haman. Her advice to impale Mordecai is every bit as ridiculous as Haman's desire to wipe out the Jews. Haman's stake would have been as tall as the king's palace and would have been a complete waste of wood (not to mention the difficulty in getting Mordecai to point on which he is to be impaled). Impaling was a common practice in Persia the victim's (or the corpse) were skewered on a stake naked to be mocked and shamed while their bodies rotted away, unburied. This was a barbarous practice meant to show strength and power, frightening would be criminals and attackers alike.⁴ Hours after feasting with the Queen, Haman will approach the king and ask for her uncle to be given to him so he can be executed. Haman's response seems to indicate he doesn't know Esther and Mordecai's relationship is she hiding herself well? Is he simply clueless? Or is this somehow not a concern for him? It is easy for those of us sitting on the outside to how petty Zeresh and Haman look, constructing a ridiculous stake in their backyard, something which will certainly cause snickering, simply because one man does not bow to Haman. But, inside the situation, Zeresh and Haman are hurt over the lack of respect for the office Haman holds (and for the King who appointed him?), and this dishonor having no real justification. From their perspective, Mordecai had given great offense and terribly wronged them, and they must humiliate him to equal measure.

Questions

1. Put yourself in Esther's shoes what are you thinking and feeling as you dress to encounter the king in his audience hall, and again as you welcome the king and Haman into your apartments for a feast?
2. What does the king's reaction to Esther say to you about his personality and his relationship with Esther?

⁴ The legend of Dracula began with the Medieval Romanian count known as Vlad the impaler, who impaled hundreds of his Turkish enemies, reports say that the stakes were like a forest.

3. Has your view of Esther changed from chapter 2 to now, what was your opinion of her when she was introduced and what is your opinion of her now?

4. Haman's mood changes on a dime simply in seeing Mordecai, what character flaws contribute to this sudden transition, and how can we prevent them in our own lives?

5. How do you prevent the pettiness of revenge from entering your mind and plans, and how do you deal with wrongs instead?

Themes

What themes do you see highlighted in the chapter and how does the chapter make you think about them?

- God's providence and human activity.
- The reversal of fortunes.
- Pride and humility.
- Identification with and outside God's people (insider vs outsider).
- The relationship between God's people and the world.
- Masculine and Feminine power struggles.
- God's use of people.

Chapter 6

¹That night, the king could not sleep, and he gave orders to bring the book of records, the annals, and they were read to the king. ²It was found written how Mordecai had told about Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, and who had conspired to assassinate King Ahasuerus. ³Then the king said, "What honor or distinction has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?" The king's servants who attended him said, "Nothing has been done for him." ⁴The king said, "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace to speak to the king about having Mordecai impaled on the stake that he had prepared for him. ⁵So the king's servants told him, "Haman is there, standing in the court." The king said, "Let him come in." ⁶So Haman came in, and the king said to him, "What shall be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor?" Haman said to himself, "Whom would the king wish to honor more than me?" ⁷So Haman said to the king, "For the man whom the king wishes to honor, ⁸let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and a horse that the king has ridden, with a royal crown on its head. ⁹Let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials; who should clothe the man whom the king wishes to honor, and then he should conduct the man on horseback through the open square of the city, proclaiming before him: 'Thus shall it be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor.'" ¹⁰Then the king said to Haman, "Quickly, take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to the Jew Mordecai who sits at the king's gate. Leave out nothing that you have mentioned." ¹¹So Haman took the robes and the horse and robed Mordecai and led him riding through the open square of the city, proclaiming, "Thus shall it be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor."

¹²Then Mordecai returned to the king's gate, but Haman hurried to his house, mourning and with his head covered. ¹³When Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him, his advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him, "If Mordecai, before whom your downfall has begun, is of the Jewish people, you will not prevail against him, but will surely fall before him."

¹⁴While they were still talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried Haman off to the banquet that Esther had prepared.

Commentary

Vv 1-11: We have seen what happens to Haman immediately following Esther's feast, now we get a picture of the king's night. We are not told if the king used the chronicles of the kingdom as a sleep aid, or, if he has simply decided to go to work because he is unable to sleep. Either way the king is recalling the events recorded about his reign. In the LXX we are told that it was God who caused a sleepless night for the king, but, here it is only implied. As the books are read the king discovers his negligence in rewarding Mordecai, who had saved him from assassination. This king who has been so generous with Haman and Esther has been harsh to the man responsible for saving his life. Again, the king refuses to act on his own ideas, rather,

he enlists the help of one of his advisors for thinking of a due honor for Mordecai. So far the king has had to make four decisions in the book (what to do with Vashti, how to replace Vashti, who should replace Vashti, and how to honor Mordecai) and he has only made one without the aid of subordinates (though it is implied that his subordinate Hegai may have helped make the decision in advance). Ahasuerus has shown little desire to do much other than party. One should notice how this indecision of the king has led to increased prominence for God's people. Every piece of advice the king has received has pushed him toward Esther and Mordecai and their promotion within the government.

Haman was already wealthy and held the highest position he could in the land, so thinking the king wanted to honor him there was little he could desire from the king. The one thing he seemed to have lacked was honor from the other officers in the kingdom. His plan seems to have been to strengthen his ties with the king and increase his honor with the other officers of the king. Only someone whom the king had great respect for would be allowed to take the king's position dressed to resemble the king. Haman's pride is again coming to the surface, he is not concerned with any real relationship with the people around him, so long as they give him due deference. He does not care about how people relate to him so long as they give him due respect, or the respect he thinks he is due. But, would Haman's suggestion have been appropriate in a Persian court? Much like today, robes were a status symbol, and conveyed the rank of the individual. To wear the king's robes and take the king's mount is to take on the authority of the king (at least to some degree). We see this displayed 2 Kings 2 when Elijah's power is transferred to his protégée Elisha through his cloak. A far more likely favor would be that conferred upon Joseph by Pharaoh in Genesis 41:42-43, but, these had already been given to Haman, so Haman had to think bigger.

This scene is completely ironic and comical, the king unable to sleep stumbles on a failure in generosity, consults the one advisor who is present during his sleepless night. This advisor is at a morbid cross-purpose with the king. Each man wants help from the other in solving his dilemma with Mordecai, and just like on a sitcom the king gets to his point first resulting in Haman being humiliated rather than glorified. Here the king who never makes a decision meets the proud and single-minded advisor and hilarity ensues. This kind of scene fits perfectly into a festive atmosphere like Purim.

Why Ahasuerus would ever agree to Haman's plan is a mystery, but, he does and the stage is set for the rug to be pulled out from under Haman. In a good sitcom, Ahasuerus would have his back to Haman as he pronounces the bane Mordecai, and Haman's mouth would hang open as he grapples with the hateful name. Haman then takes Mordecai, the man who has publicly defied him, to the square to publicly honor him. Another great twist is set up that the last time Mordecai was in the square he was in public mourning wearing burlap and covertly plotting

with Esther about the destruction of their people, now he is dressed as the king being lauded by the man who wants to have them destroyed. Thematically this marks the pivot point of the story, from this point forward everything will move in reverse (everything except Esther's course). Haman has risen to the highest position in the kingdom and is the only other guest at a banquet with the royal couple. Mordecai has sunk as low as he can go he is about to be executed in the most deplorable means possible and because of his actions his people are set to be wiped out. In his unfortunate advise, Haman will begin to descend, first losing face to his rival and then losing his life, while Mordecai will rise from the ashes to have his life restored and honor conferred on him. Though it is important to notice that Mordecai has ceased to be an active character in the story, he is simply present to provide a foil for Haman, a hateful reminder which causes Haman to act, and act in a way that ultimately leads to his destruction. Everything Haman has planned to glorify his own pride is now unraveling and will ultimately bite him.

Vv 12-14: Mordecai is in the royal robes and Haman is in mourning, the reversal of position has begun. Of course, Haman is in mourning the man who defied him at the king's gate has just conquered him publicly at the king's gate, and with the king's blessing. This is the ultimate disgrace for Haman, who must now consult his advisors. Haman had wanted to be like the king at the beginning of the chapter, now he acts like the king has acted throughout the book. The king has been unable to be decisive on his own, now Haman will be unable to come to a decision on what to do about Mordecai. One would be hard-pressed to believe that Zeresh and Haman's other friends would just now be discovering Mordecai's ethnicity. Surely they would have known this long before the king identified Mordecai as a Jew. But this is part of the great reversal of the story, as the Jewish identity of the main characters comes more to the surface they become more of a force. The plan in chapter 2 was to hide their Jewish identity and that led to dire consequences for the Jews. As the main character's identity is revealed through the king, Zeresh, and ultimately Esther herself they become invincible. Holding to their identity as Jews leads to God's protection even if God is not mentioned. Implicit behind these words is the prediction of the demise of Amalek (Numbers 24:20), though his heritage has not been talked about much since his introduction, Haman is related to the Amalekites who are destined to be wiped out by the Jews.

Time has been moving faster as the story has progressed, rushing us toward a conclusion. Early on the story would jump years at a time, beginning with chapter 3 the story slowed down to months, then days, now we are rushing through one memorable day. No sooner do Zeresh and Haman's other advisors finish speaking, then the royal entourage arrives to whisk Haman away from them to Esther's banquet. Does Haman process what they have told him, does he comprehend how Esther and Mordecai are related, is he planning to thwart Mordecai once

again, has his pride in his position returned to make him forget everything except the honor he is receiving?

Questions

1. In the story all the advice the king received ended with the promotion of Jews until God's people had the king's ear, should we expect such coincidences in modern government? Should we think about this story in the light of passages like Jeremiah 29:11 & Romans 8:28.
2. What does Haman's suggestion to the king and his reaction to Mordecai teach us about the nature of pride?
3. What do you think of the idea that the Biblical author intentionally wrote parts of this chapter to read like a sitcom so that the people gathered for Purim could have more fun at the feast?
4. What do you suppose Mordecai was thinking as he was honored by his hated rival knowing that shortly this man would kill him?
5. What do you make of Zeresh's response to Haman, is it true, how so, and what is it trying to say to us?

Themes

What themes do you see highlighted in the chapter and how does the chapter make you think about them?

- God's providence and human activity.
- The reversal of fortunes.
- Pride and humility.
- Identification with and outside God's people (insider vs outsider).
- The relationship between God's people and the world.
- Masculine and Feminine power struggles.
- God's use of people.

Chapter 7

¹ So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. ² On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, “What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.” ³ Then Queen Esther answered, “If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me—that is my petition—and the lives of my people—that is my request. ⁴ For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king.” ⁵ Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, “Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?” ⁶ Esther said, “A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!” Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen. ⁷ The king rose from the feast in wrath and went into the palace garden, but Haman stayed to beg his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that the king had determined to destroy him. ⁸ When the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman had thrown himself on the couch where Esther was reclining; and the king said, “Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?” As the words left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman’s face. ⁹ Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, “Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman’s house, 75 feet high.” And the king said, “Hang him on that.” ¹⁰ So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated.

Commentary

Vv 1-10: Just like chapter 5 the king and Haman come to a seemingly innocent banquet, and just like 5:6 Ahasuerus asks Esther what she wants. Esther has set the trap masterfully; the King and Haman seem to feel privileged to be in her presence. The scene is set just as it was on the night previous the only difference is how Esther will end the banquet. This is the fourth (of six) banquet in the book, and represents the pivot point of the feasting. In chapter 1 Ahasuerus threw a royal banquet for his officials, in chapter two he threw one in honor of Esther’s ascension to his harem. Both of those banquets were for the Persians to feast, the Jews were outsiders. The third and fourth banquets are hosted by Esther the Jew exclusively for the two highest ranking Persians and the last two banquets are for the Jews in celebration of their victory over their enemies. It is in this fourth banquet when the ability to feast transfers from the Persians to the Jews.

The repetition of the king’s question to Esther seems to heighten the urgency he places on it. Is the king concerned for Esther and compelled to help through her dinners, or perhaps, he does not want this request to hang over them any longer and wants to enjoy the feast more

adequately? Or, maybe he wants to get her request out of the way before he gets too drunk to understand what she is asking for and what he to what he is giving consent?

Esther's response plays on the king's double question, as she places her own life in parallel with the live of her people. This kind of parallel structure unites the two halves of the statement. Esther is telling the king that her life is in danger and the only way to save her is to come to the rescue of her people. Esther's position here is a far cry from how she reacted to Mordecai in their chapter 4 dialogue. Her response might sound selfish to some, but, it is rhetorically smart because Ahasuerus is not likely to care about the fate of the Jews (after all he condemned them without even inquiring which people they were). But, Ahasuerus is likely to care about the fate of his wife (whether she is queen or concubine) particularly after she has provided him with two lovely banquets. Esther has phrased the situation in such a way that she is saying to the king that the only way to save her life is to save the lives of her people. What is more, Esther does not identify the threat, nor even who her people are, she simply makes a generic request and leaves it to the king to draw the information out of her. She could not very easily tell the king that one of his own decrees was going to be responsible for her death. Esther delicately presses the matter further, by telling the king that if she were only threatened with slavery there would be no need to bother him. This maneuver will make her seem humble and respectful and while inflating the king's importance, at least in his own mind. It is also subtly implying that there would be little to complain about being sold to Persian masters, because her people are already so loyal to the king. This is a veiled strike against one of the charges that Haman made against the Jews (chapter 3). This expression of loyalty among Esther's people also plants in the king's mind that those responsible are treasonously trying to undermine his reign by eliminating segments of the population loyal to him. Esther's speech has brought the king into the equation, and shown that there is a threat to his kingdom which includes the elimination of his "Queen" and her people.

The dialogue between Esther and the king allows Esther to place the entire load of blame in Haman's lap. He becomes completely responsible for the planned extinction of the Jews (notice the king is still ignorant of her Jewish identity). The king can remain blissfully unaware that he had any part in selling Esther's people to death.

The Hebrew of the Ahasuerus and Esther's back and forth heighten the emotion through the sound. The king's words have a harsh sound and rhythm which enhance the tension he must feel. The author also uses repetition in the king's speeches to make him sound angry, frustrated and taken aback. Unfortunately, there is simply no way to translate this into English. The question we must ask is: is the king's frustration with Esther's plight, the potential threat to his kingdom, or are these two parts to the whole?

Ahasuerus finally gets around to asking who it is that holds the noose over Esther's head, and she quickly identifies Haman as the vile traitor who would destroy her people. We can see why the king would leave the room to think, his second-in-command has just been exposed as the ringleader in a plot to kill the queen and potentially undermine the king's own rule. At this point we think back to Haman's request in the last chapter to be clothed in the king's clothes and ride the king's horse. Perhaps the king is thinking back to this realizing that Haman intended these honors for himself and was planning a coup.

Haman is likewise stunned by the accusation; does he not know Esther is a Jew and relation to Mordecai? Possibly she has covered up her identity that well; and possibly Haman has no idea and thinks she is making a false accusation against him. Though at this point Haman must be starting to realize that that the queen is a Jew. His reaction is to get up off his couch, cross the floor and fall at the queen's feet to plead for mercy.

When the king re-enters the hall, he sees Haman on the couch with Esther and quickly condemns him for trying to seduce the king's wife. We must ask did the king really think that Haman was trying to seduce Esther after she what she had just said? Perhaps Haman, as some have suggested, violated a known Persian law that would not allow any man not a eunuch close to the king's wife. Maybe Haman had crossed an invisible boundary much like what Esther was afraid of in chapter 4 in going before the king. Or perhaps the king does have some cleverness in him and uses the situation as a convenient way to get rid of Haman without any mess. Perhaps the king thought the queen's accusations might be hard to prove and justify and that this was a readymade solution. We must notice again that the king, as he always does in this book, gets the idea for Haman's death from an advisor, in this case the guard taking Haman away. The king may be infuriated, but, it is another who devises punishment for Haman.

One thing is not clear, was it the king's words which cover Haman's face as a type of mark of guilt, or was it the arresting soldiers putting a hood over Haman as the king spoke. Either is possible. If it is the king's words covering Haman then we have an official pronouncement of guilt, which is missing otherwise. If it is the guards covering Haman's head, then they are doing their job with no official direction from the king.

The words of Zeresh and Haman's friends comes true as for the second time in as many chapters Haman feels the reversal of his plans. Haman had meant death to Mordecai and praise and honor for himself; yet, it was Mordecai who was given praise and honor and now Haman will come to death. Haman will even be killed on the very stake on which he had intended to kill Mordecai.

Questions

1. What do you suppose the King's motives were in pressing the subject of Esther's desire of him?
2. What are some adjectives you would use to describe Esther's tactics in bringing the Jew's situation to the eyes of the King? Should her tactics be emulated?
3. How would you react to Esther's demand if you were the king and if you were Haman?
4. Was it just for the king to Haman killed for attempting to molest Esther, when he obviously was in a position pleading for his life? Should the king be praised or scolded?
5. What do you think the relationship between Esther and Ahasuerus was like before and after this night?

Themes

What themes do you see highlighted in the chapter and how does the chapter make you think about them?

- God's providence and human activity.
- The reversal of fortunes.
- Pride and humility.
- Identification with and outside God's people (insider vs outsider).
- The relationship between God's people and the world.
- Masculine and Feminine power struggles.
- God's use of people.

Chapter 8

¹On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews; and Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her. ²Then the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. So Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.

³Then Esther spoke again to the king; she fell at his feet, weeping and pleading with him to avert the evil design of Haman the Agagite and the plot that he had devised against the Jews. ⁴The king held out the golden scepter to Esther, ⁵and Esther rose and stood before the king. She said, "If it pleases the king, and if I have won his favor, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I have his approval, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote giving orders to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king. ⁶For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming on my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?" ⁷Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to the Jew Mordecai, "See, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have impaled him on the stake, because he plotted to lay hands on the Jews. ⁸You may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring; for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked."

⁹The king's secretaries were summoned at that time, in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day; and an edict was written, according to all that Mordecai commanded, to the Jews and to the satraps and the governors and the officials of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, one hundred twenty-seven provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, and also to the Jews in their script and their language. ¹⁰He wrote letters in the name of King Ahasuerus, sealed them with the king's ring, and sent them by mounted couriers riding on fast steeds bred from the royal herd. ¹¹By these letters the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to assemble and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, with their children and women, and to plunder their goods ¹²on a single day throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. ¹³A copy of the writ was to be issued as a decree in every province and published to all peoples, and the Jews were to be ready on that day to take revenge on their enemies. ¹⁴So the couriers, mounted on their swift royal steeds, hurried out, urged by the king's command. The decree was issued in the citadel of Susa.

¹⁵Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king, wearing royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown and a mantle of fine linen and purple, while the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced. ¹⁶For the Jews there was light and gladness, joy and honor. ¹⁷In every province and in every city, wherever the king's command and his edict came, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a festival and a holiday. Furthermore, many of the peoples of the country professed to be Jews, because the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them.

Commentary

Vv 1-2: The first thing to notice about this chapter is that the king and Esther have far different aims. Ahasuerus is satisfied that Haman is dead, his crown and wife are safe, to him the matter is concluded. He even gives Esther and Mordecai the property and position Haman had possessed; there has been a complete reversal for Mordecai, who has gone from a forgotten subject who lives in fear and mourning to the second in command with power and wealth. Esther too has reversed her position in some ways, she no longer hides her identity, but, openly declares her family and people. These two reversals are striking and different, Mordecai's reversal is in his perception by society while Esther's is completely internal she has adopted her identity which she formerly concealed. Mordecai's reversal of fortunes is far easier to spot but we must ask is his reversal a positive and should we envy his position? Esther's reversal is harder to notice and but perhaps the far better since she becomes the better person.

Vv 3-8: The king has moved on and forgotten that Esther's request in 7:3 was not simply for her life; but, also for the lives of her people. Ahasuerus thinks that he has resolved the situation by saving his queen (and himself) from the embarrassment of Haman, yet, Esther renews her efforts to save her people. Esther's tearful approach to the king shows that she values the lives of the Jews equally to her own, and that she is now truly the Queen of the Jews. We will now see a complete reversal of Haman's request of the king in chapter 3 as Esther asks Ahasuerus to revoke his own law. Ahasuerus replies that Mordecai has the power to write laws "irrevocable" laws in the king's name. Both Esther and Ahasuerus have been careful to stress that Haman was responsible for the edict against the Jews and implicitly absolving the king of responsibility. And where Esther takes her life in her own hands to tearfully represent the Jews who are still under threat, Ahasuerus divorces himself from the situation taking no responsibility for causing the problem and taking no role in resolving the situation.

Esther is now the Queen, Ahasuerus is still the same king he has ever been, and Mordecai is still the Jew. What does Mordecai's epitaph mean, is it a positive or a negative? Mordecai has been identified as "the Jew" before, but, that has always been a cultural distinction in the mouths of non-Jews (5:10, 6:13). Is Mordecai the defender of the Jews and thus their representative, or is he simply an ethnic Jew who carries the burden of this distinction without any of the religious obligation it should imply? Or is this title simply to remind us he was the principle target or Haman "enemy of the Jews" (v1)? Perhaps the author is using the epitaph to show that while the enemies of the Jews seem to have power at present, in the end "the Jew" will take this position and authority? This last interpretation is probably the best, since Mordecai is about to reverse the policy of Haman in almost the exact wording of Haman's original decree. The Jew is now in position to remake the destruction of the enemy of the Jews and we must consider how he chooses to act.

Vv 9-14: Mordecai is in the same position Haman was in in chapter 3 and the language used in this paragraph will almost mimic the language used of Haman's original decree. Whether it was historically true or not we have been repeatedly told that an edict signed in the king's name cannot be revoked. Mordecai thus is presented the challenge of undoing the threat to the Jews by Haman's law without the simplicity of revoking the law. How does one take away the threat of death and destruction when one cannot countermand the threat? This is no easy task, and Mordecai's solution reveals this. Before digging into Mordecai's solution, we must acknowledge what the author is trying to do in Mordecai's law. In this scene, the author is intentionally playing on the complete reversal between Haman and Mordecai; and before we praise or condemn Mordecai we must recognize that the language of his decree is meant to help highlight that reversal. Mordecai's decree is the final reversal in fortunes exalting the fortunes of the Jews while their enemies are handed the fates they intended for the Jews. While we can debate the morality of Mordecai's law and whether we should accept it as an ethical precedent, we must recognize the literary importance of this scene. The author, first and foremost, is telling us that in the end God's people will be vindicated and protected and that the enemies to God's people will be destroyed by their own plots and schemes. This is a major theological point and must not be missed, God will eventually vindicate the righteous and the wicked will be undone. This is especially true when we consider that Mordecai's decree was issued seventy days after Haman's or in the fullness of time the evil of the enemy was overturned. This is highly symbolic language which should not be missed or overlooked in an effort to see the "history" in the story.

Now, with a proper understanding of Mordecai's law within its literary context we are free to debate the morality of Mordecai's law within the story and potential history. Is Mordecai's law allowing the Jews to defend themselves ethical? There are three parts to be considered, first is whether it is ethical for the Jews to defend themselves, second is whether it is ethical for the Jews to take revenge on their attackers in killing their wives and children, and third whether it is ethical for the Jews to plunder the attackers. There is significant room for debate about the morality of defensive warfare and this passage adds fuel to the debate about whether God's people are called to be complete pacifists or if they can undertake defensive wars. It is important to notice that God is not present in this decree, it is Mordecai's reaction to the situation and should not be immediately adopted as a divine solution to the problem. God's answer to the dilemma may have been different than Mordecai's God may have desired a different resolution that Mordecai did not think of, We are thus free to ask if Mordecai's was the best solution. Some commentators will justify Mordecai's edict on the grounds that it was necessary to spare the Jews from annihilation and that if the Jews were destroyed God's plan of redemption would fail. This is flawed reasoning and makes God very small and almost human. Mordecai's plan does not simply become moral because he is acting as the agent of God's people and this is the best he can think up. Again, there are several views on the moral use of

violence, but, simply to accord morality to violence because God's people are the ones using violence is unacceptable. If "God can raise up children of Abraham from these stones" as Jesus says (Matt. 3:9, Luke 3:8) then it is short-sighted to think that God's plan for the redemption of creation hangs on Mordecai's edict and the violence it allows. Such thinking says that because God has chosen a people any action they undertake is ethical and should be supported, this contradicts Deuteronomy 9:4-6 and is indeed one of the reasons why Israel was exiled from the land according to Jeremiah.

The NIV and NLT translate v11 as if the Jews are allowed to kill those who are attacking their wives and children instead of allowing the Jews to kill the wives and children of those who attack them. But, the Hebrew indicates this edict allowed the Jews to kill the families of those attacking them.⁵ Is this kind of retributive justice ethical? What is the message of killing innocents along with attackers? Mordecai's command cannot be seen as an ethical command to the peoples in this respect and certainly does not correspond to the imperatives of God's law. Some commentators seek to justify Mordecai's command as killing of the ungodly or, as the NIV and NLT have done rework the translation to be less egregious. But, we must not confuse Mordecai's law with a Divine command. God did not issue a command to kill the women and children and simply because Mordecai is the "hero" of the story does not mean he speaks for God. Likewise, we are hard-pressed to allow the Jewish plundering of their enemies to be ethical (of course we must keep the literary context of reversal in mind). Allowing plunder of enemies removes any notion of a defensive war, a defensive war does not leave plunder to be gained and to allow Jews to plunder would be enemies takes away any ethical high ground from the Jewish position. (to this end chapter 9 reveals the Jews do not take plunder maintaining their moral compass).

Vv 15-17: The reaction of Susa completes the reversal of the chapter. In chapter 3 Susa was in disarray after Haman's edict, now it celebrates with the overturning of the unjust law. Likewise, the entire Persian empire celebrates with many professing to be Jews. This is a difficult phrase; does it mean that many people in the Persian empire converted to Judaism? Unlikely. Most people in the empire would have been completely in the dark about what had happened between Haman and Esther and Mordecai; without the frame of reference these people would have no reason for converting. It is more likely that these people sided with the Jews, that is when the two edicts were posted everyone had to make a decision whether they supported the killing of the Jews or not. Many put in this position sided with the Jews and

⁵ It is important to recognize two things, 1 permission is different from command, this edict allows the Jews to kill it does not command, 2 in the text this is a literary reversal of the original decree and any debate about the morality is made hypothetical by this literary motif.

refused to join in the attempt at exterminating them. This does not mean that these people became Jews, just that they stood with the Jews in their fight against their enemies.

Questions

1. Consider the idea of reversal in this chapter, how do you feel about such reversal of fortunes happening in the world around you? Should we be working toward such reversals, why and why not?
2. How do you determine what makes someone a truly righteous character in a Biblical story, someone worthy of emulation?
3. What do you make of the three characters in this chapter, have they changed, and are they worthy of emulation (heroes) or are they warnings to us?
4. What do you make of the wording of Mordecai's edict, is it ethical, how should the people of God respond to such threats and situation when they are in power? Compare your answer with Deuteronomy 9:4-6.
5. "Many people of the country professed to be Jews", what do you think this reaction says about Mordecai's law and how human nature reacts to power struggles, how should we view this profession?

Themes

What themes do you see highlighted in the chapter and how does the chapter make you think about them?

- God's providence and human activity.
- The reversal of fortunes.
- Pride and humility.
- Identification with and outside God's people (insider vs outsider).
- The relationship between God's people and the world.
- Masculine and Feminine power struggles.
- God's use of people.

Chapters 9 & 10

¹Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day, when the king's command and edict were about to be executed, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain power over them, but which had been changed to a day when the Jews would gain power over their foes, ²the Jews gathered in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who had sought their ruin; and no one could withstand them, because the fear of them had fallen upon all peoples. ³All the officials of the provinces, the satraps and the governors, and the royal officials were supporting the Jews, because the fear of Mordecai had fallen upon them. ⁴For Mordecai was powerful in the king's house, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces as the man Mordecai grew more and more powerful. ⁵So the Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, slaughtering, and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them. ⁶In the citadel of Susa the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred people. ⁷They killed Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha, ⁸Poratha, Adalia, Aridatha, ⁹Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai, Vaizatha, ¹⁰the ten sons of Haman son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews; but they did not touch the plunder.

¹¹That very day the number of those killed in the citadel of Susa was reported to the king. ¹²The king said to Queen Esther, "In the citadel of Susa the Jews have killed five hundred people and also the ten sons of Haman. What have they done in the rest of the king's provinces? Now what is your petition? It shall be granted you. And what further is your request? It shall be fulfilled." ¹³Esther said, "If it pleases the king, let the Jews who are in Susa be allowed tomorrow also to do according to this day's edict, and let the ten sons of Haman be hanged on the gallows." ¹⁴So the king commanded this to be done; a decree was issued in Susa, and the ten sons of Haman were impaled. ¹⁵The Jews who were in Susa gathered also on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and they killed three hundred persons in Susa; but they did not touch the plunder.

¹⁶Now the other Jews who were in the king's provinces also gathered to defend their lives, and gained relief from their enemies, and killed seventy-five thousand of those who hated them; but they laid no hands on the plunder. ¹⁷This was on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth day they rested and made that a day of feasting and gladness.

¹⁸But the Jews who were in Susa gathered on the thirteenth day and on the fourteenth, and rested on the fifteenth day, making that a day of feasting and gladness. ¹⁹Therefore the Jews of the villages, who live in the open towns, hold the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a day for gladness and feasting, a holiday on which they send gifts of food to one another.

²⁰Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, ²¹enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, ²²as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they

should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor. ²³ So the Jews adopted as a custom what they had begun to do, as Mordecai had written to them.

²⁴ Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur—that is “the lot”—to crush and destroy them; ²⁵ but when Esther came before the king, he gave orders in writing that the wicked plot that he had devised against the Jews should come upon his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. ²⁶ Therefore these days are called Purim, from the word Pur. Thus because of all that was written in this letter, and of what they had faced in this matter, and of what had happened to them, ²⁷ the Jews established and accepted as a custom for themselves and their descendants and all who joined them, that without fail they would continue to observe these two days every year, as it was written and at the time appointed. ²⁸ These days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every family, province, and city; and these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants.

²⁹ Queen Esther daughter of Abihail, along with the Jew Mordecai, gave full written authority, confirming this second letter about Purim. ³⁰ Letters were sent wishing peace and security to all the Jews, to the one hundred twenty-seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, ³¹ and giving orders that these days of Purim should be observed at their appointed seasons, as the Jew Mordecai and Queen Esther enjoined on the Jews, just as they had laid down for themselves and for their descendants regulations concerning their fasts and their lamentations. ³² The command of Queen Esther fixed these practices of Purim, and it was recorded in writing.

^{10:1} King Ahasuerus laid tribute on the land and on the islands of the sea. ² All the acts of his power and might, and the full account of the high honor of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the annals of the kings of Media and Persia? ³ For Mordecai the Jew was next in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he was powerful among the Jews and popular with his many kindred, for he sought the good of his people and interceded for the welfare of all his descendants.

Commentary

Vv 1-10: The edict of Haman finally goes into effect and so also does Mordecai’s rebuttal. Notice though that they are now the king’s laws, though Ahasuerus has taken great pains not to be associated with this messy work. The outcome of the law is already known even before the fateful day because Mordecai had taken pains to protect the Jews. The outcome is also assured because the Persian governors side with Mordecai. We should not think that the Persian governors siding with Mordecai is necessarily because of religious sympathies, rather, Mordecai is the second most powerful man in the kingdom these governors are simply siding with the

status quo. Among those killed that day were the ten sons of Haman, completely eliminating Haman's family and with him the Amalekite threat to Israel. One question which comes out of v 5 is how defensive was this struggle? Did five hundred individuals really attack the Jewish community in Susa on that day, or did the Jews take up arms against those who they saw as enemies?

It is also important to note that the Jews did not take the plunder which Mordecai's edict allowed after they killed their enemies. This connects Esther 9 with 1 Samuel 15 where Saul (though told to kill everything) plunders the Amalekites and takes Agag hostage. The Jews, allowed the plunder by another descendent of Kish, hold to the ideal of Samuel and deny themselves the sin of Saul. Does this tell us something about how the people of God should act even when their leadership gives contrary permission?

Vv 11-15: This paragraph should give us all great pause, as Esther asks the king for a day where the Jews could go after their enemies. This action is surely as egregious as Haman's request to kill the Jews. The individuals whom Esther wants to kill will be unarmed and unable to defend themselves against the attacking Jews. Most scholars will point out the literary necessity of having a second day of celebration for Purim. Historically Purim has been celebrated on two different days depending on where the Jews were. If the Book of Esther is the foundation for this holiday (as it claims) then it must account for this difference. Some scholars have also suggested that this request shows the historical setting of the book because it reveals a character flaw in the historical Esther. The author had no choice but to include this scene because it was historical and even though it makes the heroine look bad it had to be maintained as a true reflection of the events. Esther compounds this with a desire to see the bodies of Haman's sons impaled as their father was.

Vv 16-23: Even in an empire as large as Persia seventy-five thousand is a very large number for the dead, especially when we consider how small the Jewish population must have been. This number may well be an exaggeration meant to show the scale of destruction of the enemies of the Jews. After all, this was meant to be read at a festival and a tremendous victory is a great story for a festival. We must notice that the feast of Purim is impromptu not commanded by anyone simply celebrated by the very relieved Jews.

These paragraphs are the origin story of the feast of Purim, both the spontaneous nature of its origins and the codifying of it into an ethnic holiday. Mordecai tells the Jews to remember their deliverance with the same joy they originally celebrated. Unlike other Jewish festivals celebrated to this point, this feast is not commanded by God and has little explicitly religious meaning.

Vv 24-28: This paragraph is the establishment of Purim, providing a short recap of the story with the logic for the name. Scholars debate whether the feast Purim took its name from the “purim” the plural for “pur”, but, since there are no better suggestions it is probably best to accept this idea. We should notice that v 27 explicitly tells the reader that to be a good Jew who keeps with the traditions of the people one must celebrate Purim annually. According to the Book of Esther Purim is a national celebration with the significance of other festivals like Passover and Pentecost.

Vv 29-32: Esther (both the Queen and the book) writes that this deliverance must be celebrated annually just as the fasts. The fasts are probably the same fasts referred to in Zechariah 8:19 which were established during the exile in commemoration of the destruction of Jerusalem and the beginning of the exile. These fasts helped the people recognize and take part in the failures of the past, in an endeavor to change for the future. In the same way, Esther’s new celebration will help people take part in the salvation of the past looking forward and trusting in the salvation of the future.

10:1-3: These verses provide a fitting epilogue for the story. When the story began Ahasuerus’ court was run by incompetent men and his queen was uninvolved with the story; now, his court runs smoothly with a queen that other rulers would dream of having. What has changed, the Jews are out in the open and helping him to run things. There is an implicit message that when God’s people are in control of society the world runs smoother. There is also a message that God will bless God’s people with responsibility and social standing. One must ask if this second implicit message is true, and if it is what responsibilities do Christians in such positions have for changing society?

Questions

1. In not plundering the enemies of the Jews, particularly Haman’s sons, the Jews reverse the precedent of 1 Samuel 15, how does this speak to you in living out a life of God?
2. What do you make of Esther’s request for a second day for the Jews to kill their enemies, how should this request influence our thoughts about our enemies particularly in the light of Matthew 5:44?
3. Do you ever have impromptu celebrations with parties for the good things God has done for you, your friends, or family? What do these parties look like and how do you incorporate the sacred?
4. Zechariah and Esther command the people to remember the past in annual fasts and feasts, is it important for us to commemorate significant moments in our community history with such feasts and fasts, how do we do that within our local congregations?

5. Should Christians seek high positions within society and how should Christians respond to wealth, privilege, and power?

Themes

What themes do you see highlighted in the chapter and how does the chapter make you think about them?

- God's providence and human activity.
- The reversal of fortunes.
- Pride and humility.
- Identification with and outside God's people (insider vs outsider).
- The relationship between God's people and the world.
- Masculine and Feminine power struggles.
- God's use of people.

ⁱ Jobe, *Esther* 570-574.

ⁱⁱ Jobe, 1614.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jobe, 1663.

^{iv} Berlin, xxxix.

^v Berlin, 38.